DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 466 772 TM 034 283

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TITLE	Without Value, without Validity.
PUB DATE	2002-04-00
NOTE	17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 1-5, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Constructivism (Learning); Criteria; Epistemology; Postmodernism; *Qualitative Research; *Research Methodology; *Validity; Values
IDENTIFIERS	Poststructuralism

ABSTRACT

At the heart of the debate over validity in qualitative research are ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological questions that are themselves blurred in a postmodern/poststructuralist matrix. This paper explores some of the foundations and criteria for establishing, representing, and evaluating the truth, rigor, and accuracy of accounts of lived experience. The conventional manner in which to discuss conceptions of quantitative validity is to frame the discussion along the paradigm axis, but newer discourses about validity have adopted a more relational, as opposed to methodological, perspective. The paper reviews the development of various widely held conceptualizations of validity and proposes an eclectic/stage reformulation of validity. In the end, researchers ought to strive to reconstruct descriptions and interpretations that are supported by evidence and to develop theories that both "fit" and "work." Qualitative researchers should be trying to understand social phenomena and to "re-present" it in as transparent and credible a fashion as possible, although it must be remembered that as finite beings, all researchers can do is construct social and educational worlds. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

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Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New Orleans, LA
April 2002

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Without Value, Without Validity

"Facts only speak when interrogated, and they always reply in the language in which they are spoken to" (Shea, 1990, p. xiii).

Introduction: Validity crisis

Confronting qualitative researchers over the past few decades has been the fomenting "triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis" (p. 17) which intersect and blur within the new discourses of postmodernism and poststructuralism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Saussure, Wittengenstein (Polkinghorne, 1989), as well as Lakoff and Johnson (1999), Burke (1964), and others have brought to light the problematic notion that there is "no neutral language by means of which reality as it is in itself can be described" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 28). Language is no longer viewed as a corresponding mapping of the real world, but rather "accounts of 'experience' seem more adequately understood as the outcomes of a particular textual/cultural history... embedded within the sense-making processes of historically and culturally situated communities" (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1027).

At the very heart of the validity debate are ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological questions which are themselves blurred in a postmodern/poststructuralist matrix; Lincoln (1995) elaborates

> just as the naturalistic/constructivist paradigm effectively brought about the irrelevance of the distinction between ontology and epistemology, so too does this paradigm and interpretive social science in general bring about the collapse of the distinction between standards, rigor, and quality criteria and the formerly separate consideration of research ethics (p. 286).

What are the foundations and criteria for establishing, representing, and evaluating the truth, rigour, and accuracy of the accounts of lived experience? And to what ends and for whom are researchers producing them?

These questions have been addressed in a number of fashions and from a variety of perspectives and stakeholders. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998) state "...things will never be the same. We are in a new age where messy, uncertain, multivoiced texts, cultural criticism, and new experimental works are more common" (p. 30). The "validity crisis" has placed into doubt "the pursuit of universal or general laws, the capacity of science to produce accurate portrayals of its subject matter, the possibility of scientific progression towards objective truth," (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1026) as well as the very nature and goal of our craft (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Fine, Weis, Wesseen, & Wong, 2000).

Validity for whom?

Indeed, the postmodern era has been characterised as a time of tension, self-doubt, self-indulgence, and creative and communicative self and cross-examination (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Validity as criteria for evaluation is not unitary nor static. It is fluid and dynamic, evolving and transmogrifying as a function of the idiosyncrasies of circumstance. Smith and Deemer (2000) state "in the age of relativism the issue of who is making judgments, about what inquiries, for what purposes, and with whom one shares these judgments is of critical importance" (p. 887).

A variety of researchers have attempted to reconcile with the notion of "validity" in light of the tumultuous upheavals to what was once viewed as a solid foundation on which to base both our knowledge claims and our raison d'être. Postmodern researchers are struggling to

reformulate their identities as the mainstay of human science research, which traditionally has been concerned with making and justifying "findings as objective and free from personal and cultural bias [as possible]" (Polkinghorne ,1989, p. 31) no longer seems achievable nor desirable (Lather, 1986; Lincoln, 1997).

Conventional qualitative validity

The conventional manner in which to discuss conceptions of qualitative validity is to frame the discussion along the paradigm axis (e.g., Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000); however, this may no longer be optimal as a guide to our research practice. Given that newer discourses concerning validity have adopted a decidedly more relational rather than methodological perspective (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 2000), while others have rejected the notion altogether (e.g., Wolcott, 1994), perhaps it is time to seek a synthesis informed by research in practice. Following a review of the development of various widely held conceptualisations of validity an eclectic/stage reformulation of validity is proposed.

Postpositivist/Neo-realist

For neo-realist qualitative researchers, conceptions of validity undergo adjustments to better reflect qualitative methodologies, but nevertheless tend to closely mirror the basic philosophical underpinnings of traditional validity and reliability as they are typically thought of in quantitative terms. For instance Kirk and Miller (1986) state

> ...appropriate and useful... [is] the partitioning of objectivity into two components: *reliability* and *validity*. Loosely speaking, "reliability" is the extent to which a measurement procedure yields the same answer however and whenever it is carried out; "validity" is the extent to which it gives the correct answer. These

concepts apply equally well to qualitative observations (p. 19, italics in original).

Guiding Maxwell's (1992) and Johnson's (1997) research are the principles of *descriptive validity*, *interpretive validity*, *theoretical validity* (which includes Johnson's *internal validity*) as well as, for Maxwell, *generalizability* (which includes Johnson's *external validity*) and *evaluative validity*.

Briefly stated: *Descriptive validity* refers to the factual accuracy of accounts reported by the researcher. Researchers must not fabricate or distort events or things they report they saw or heard. One must also keep in mind that descriptive validity can "refer to issues of omission as well as of commission" (Maxwell, 1992, p. 287). Included in this category is the monition that if qualitative claims imply frequency they should be supported by simple number counts; for instance, when reporting that events occurred "often", happened in "large" number, were "typical" or "rare". Words implying degree can quickly lead to researcher bias if they are not accompanied by specific frequencies that clearly define them in the context of the current research endeavour. All other validity categories are dependent first and foremost on this primary validity. Crosschecking with other observers or with a recording device can help corroborate observations. *Interpretive validity* is concerned with "what objects, events, and behaviors *mean* to the people engaged in and with them" (Maxwell, 1992, p. 288, italics in original). Interpretive research seeks to understand events not according to the researcher's perspective, but from the participant's perspective. Interpretive researchers are concerned with the emic rather than etic viewpoint. Johnson (1997) suggests member checks, which although not perfect, are frequently of use to clear up areas of miscommunication; whereas Maxwell (1992) is

decidedly more cautious "it is essential not to treat latter accounts as incorrigible; participants may be unaware of their own feelings or views, may recall inaccurately, and may consciously or unconsciously distort or conceal their views" (p. 290). *Theoretical validity* refers to a theory's workability and fit, the theory's success at functioning as an explanation of a phenomenon. Contained within this notion of validity are two components: a) that the concepts or categories employed by the theory are relevant to the phenomenon, and b) that the putative relationships between these categories interact as the researcher claims they do; what some call causal validity or what Johnson (1997) refers to as internal validity. To improve theoretical validity some researchers employ theory triangulation, comparing their theories with alternatives about the same phenomenon. An alternative technique used to improve this type of validity is negative case sampling. Cases that do not fit one's explanation are useful for expanding one's theory and help to ensure that one is not merely looking at confirmatory cases. Peer review is also suggested as a useful technique in order to help point out problems/gaps with the explanation provided. *Generalizability* encompasses two components, internal and external. Involved in internal validity is generalising within the community to people, events, and settings that were not directly observed. External validity refers to generalising to other communities, groups, or institutions; the former, according to Maxwell (1992) being of much more importance to qualitative researchers than the latter. Last, *evaluative validity* refers to the evaluation of the behaviours of participants as "right" or "wrong". Elaborating on his position concerning evaluative validity, Maxwell's states "[it] is not as central to qualitative researchers... to raise questions about the evaluative framework implicit in an account, however, as many critical theorists do, *creates* issues of an account's evaluative validity, and no account is immune to such

questions" (p. 295, italics in original).

Validity as it is conceptualised by neo-realist qualitative researchers is largely concerned with getting the descriptions and inferences "right"; the inquirer's subjectivity is downplayed. Validity is very much couched in procedures that are thought to enhance the researcher's ability to provide quasi-isomorphic accounts of the experiences under scrutiny.

Somewhat related to the neo-realist approach to validity are the early reconceptualisations made by researchers such as Lincoln and Guba (1985), which still retained holdovers from positivist assumptions; for, although they made significant adjustments to the conception of validity in order to more accurately reflect the divergence between the philosophical foundations that separated the approaches for generating scientific knowledge, they were still very much tied to the hegemonic discourses of the dominant positivist worldview. Guba and Lincoln (1989) reflect on their earlier attempt "...there remains a feeling of constraint, a feeling of continuing to play 'in the friendly confines' of the opposition's court" (p. 245). This is not to suggest that the 1985 reformulations are not innovative and useful for many, but as they explain, these reconceptualisations were still tied and organised according to the dominant text, in this case quantitative notions of validity.

Constructivist

Validity standards proposed by constructivists Lincoln and Guba in 1985 reflect the differing ontological/epistemological foundations that underpin many qualitative inquiries, however, were still framed by, and parallel to, quantitative notions of validity. For example, suggesting four new constructs for judging the **trustworthiness** of qualitative inquiries, they proposed: (a) *credibility*, which parallels internal validity and addresses the inquirer's success at

providing assurances that the proposed representations and reconstructions are congruent with those of the participant's views, (b) *transferability*, which parallels external validity, and addresses the issue of generalisation by demanding that researchers provide sufficient information to allow subsequent readers to judge the applicability and degree of similarity of the current study to other cases where the findings might be transferred, (c) *dependability*, which parallels reliability, and requires the inquirer to demonstrate that the research process is logical, traceable, and documented, and finally, (d) *confirmability*, which parallels objectivity, and calls for the researcher to establish that the data and subsequent interpretations are linked and not merely figments of the researcher's imagination; assertions, findings, and interpretations must be linked to the data themselves in readily discernible ways. "The reader should note that trustworthiness is a matter of concern for the consumer of inquirer reports" (p. 328), contrary to the positivist position which holds the researcher as guarantor of validity.

It is noteworthy that for certain qualitative researchers the postmodern/poststructuralist adventure ends at this juncture (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). It would appear that the reformulations of validity suggested by Maxwell (1992) as well as those by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are for several researchers the accepted criteria by which to measure qualitative validity. In fact, the techniques Lincoln and Guba suggest for establishing the trustworthiness of research endeavours are as relevant today as they were in 1985; for example, Creswell and Miller (2000) and Johnson (1997) reiterate in large measure the same techniques for ensuring validity proposed by Lincoln and Guba in 1985 whilst offering no new ones.

The techniques Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest for enhancing the **credibility** of research reports are: *prolonged engagement* (which provides scope), *persistent observation*

(which provides depth), *triangulation* (of sources, methods, investigators, and theories), *peer debriefing*, *negative case analysis*, *referential checks* (i.e, tape recordings), and *member checks* (of data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions); for enhancing **transferability** (which is determined not by the researcher, but by the potential applier) they recommend *providing thick descriptions;* for enhancing **dependability** they suggest establishing a corroborating *audit* with an elaborate procedure for employing two or more investigators; and for **confirmability** they also suggest *an audit* likened to that of a fiscal auditor's accounting of receipts. Required for both transferability and confirmability is an *audit trail* (an extensive recording of raw data, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction products, process notes, other notes related to the project, and instrument development information, such as schedules, pilot forms, and so on), and finally, for the entire research process (all four validity categories) they suggest keeping a *reflexive journal* (a diary of the self and method).

To this point, the discussions of validity have rested mainly on the methodological plane (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). They are foundational in nature and, as underscored earlier, they reflect previous notions of validity as conceptualised in positivistic discourses. Reviewed next are conceptions of validity that "could have been invented by someone who had never heard of positivism or its claims for rigor" (p. 245).

Validity: A relational rather than methodological turn

As forms of resistance and innovation grow more sophisticated and the legitimacy of qualitative research continues to assert itself "...new emerging criteria...[are increasingly] relational, that is, they recognize and validate relationships between the inquirer and those participating in the inquiry" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 278). This marks an important and

complementary shift away from focussing merely on foundational concerns and the crisis of legitimation; ethics are now considered part and parcel of the researcher's craft (Lincoln, 1997). The conceptions of validity that follow are grounded in the crisis of praxis (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and of representation (e.g., Lather, 1993).

By 1989, Guba and Lincoln no longer depend on dominant philosophical and quantitative formulations as a backdrop to their updated criteria for guiding and evaluating qualitative endeavours. In these later reformulations, they propose **authenticity** as an alternative form of validity reflecting the differing goals of inquiries rooted in constructivist epistemologies. This newer reconceptualisation differs quite markedly from their (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) previous stance as well as from more traditional notions of validity, both quantitative and certain qualitative. Their new criteria include: 1) *fairness*, the extent to which researchers solicit and represent respondents' constructions and values in a balanced manner, 2) *ontological authenticity* the extent to which participants' own constructions are enhanced or made more informed as a result of being in the study, 3) *educative authenticity* the extent to which participants are made more aware, appreciative, and understanding of the constructions of others, 4) *catalytic authenticity* the extent to which action is spurred on by the research process, and last, 5) *tactical authenticity* which refers to the empowerment of participants as a result of the research process.

One will notice the decidedly emancipatory characterisation of research as praxis. As dialogue grows more complex, multi-vocal, and reflexive the field of qualitative research continues to experience creative tension and vibrancy (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Newer reconceptualisations are put forth in the public arena for discussion; they are proffered as "incitements to discourse" (Lather, 1993, p. 674), and it is hoped that through such destabilising

engagements research and practices are continuously reevaluated. For Lather (1993) it is important to retain the term *validity* "in order to both circulate and break with the signs that code it" (p. 674). What follows is Lather's criticalist reframing of validity.

Critical theorist

Lather (1993) proposes four alternatives to validity, and like Mishler (1990) provides exemplars—Mishler (1990) proposes that exemplars of inquiry-guided studies that provide "reasonable grounds for evaluating their trustworthiness" (p. 415) are a useful alternative tool for modelling the "actual practices of working scientists" (p. 423). Space limitations will not permit further discussion of exemplars, but suffice to say that they exist, and are an alternative technique for guiding and fostering validity in our craft—The four "guerilla" attacks to traditional representation that Lather (1993) proposes as reframings of validity are: *validity as simulacra/ironic validity*, *Lyotardian paralogy/neo-pragmatic validity*, *Derridean rigour/rhizomatic validity*, and *voluptuous validity/situated validity*. Briefly explained: a) *validity as simulacra/ironic validity*, is to refuse closure, to use researcher power to undercut representation; to "...[use] simulacra to resist the hold of the real and to foreground radical unknowability..." (p. 677). It is, as a response to the crisis of representation, to demonstrate the unreliability of meaning, that truth is unrepresentable, b) *Lyotardian paralogy/neo-pragmatic validity*, is to highlight differences and contradictions, as Lather explains, "such a strategy refines our sensitivity to differences, introduces dissensus into consensus, and legitimates via fostering heterogeneity" (p. 680); it "reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (p. 679); to highlight language games and the multiplicity of voice, c) *Derridean rigour/rhizomatic validity*, is to follow the anarchistic spread of systems and their arbitrary branching-offs; tangled ideas

which resist being represented as an orderly structure. It is multi-centred complexity that "call[s]...[to] the otherness of any system" (p. 680), it calls into question what counts as fact and what as detail, d) last, *voluptuous validity/situated validity* is "risky practice", to go too far, to write beyond what one understands (Creswell, 1998).

The validity framings that Lather (1993) offers are to highlight problems, not solutions in our poststructural times of "crisis "; they are to act as provocateurs to beliefs about validity and representation. Another provocative approach to validity is to outright reject it as useful in guiding qualitative research.

Validity: Not our concern

"Validity neither guides nor informs my work" (p. 356), Wolcott (1994) explains "I do not accept validity as a valid criterion for guiding or judging my work.... I suggest we look elsewhere in our continuing search for and dialogue about criteria appropriate to qualitative researchers' approaches and purposes" (p. 369). According to Wolcott validity distracts from the researcher's task at hand of "*understanding* what is going on here". Discussing *understanding*, Wolcott claims that contained in most significant qualitative reports, there is an inherent sense of tension and dialectic reflecting "normal" human contradictions; this belief mirrors Lather's Lyotardian paralogy/neo-pragmatic validity. In fact, Wolcott in several ways presents an amalgam of many of the techniques for enhancing validity that have been previously reviewed (given in parenthesis), while also offering some new ones. For "not getting it all wrong" (p. 347), he suggests: 1) *Talk little, listen a lot*, "be willing to look a fool for the sake of science" (p. 348), Wolcott does not confront participants with contradictions but does not mind presenting himself as a bit dense in order to have problematic statements repeated or explained,

2) *record accurately*, try to use the informants precise words (descriptive validity; referential checks), 3) *begin writing early*, this helps identify gaps early and allows time to get valuable feedback from knowledgeable insiders (persistent observation). In addition, successive approximations help stories become, if not more accurate, at least more contextualised, 4) *let readers "see" for themselves*, include as much primary data as possible and reasonable (providing thick descriptions), 5) *report fully*, include issues that are not fully developed or observations you do not fully understand, let the reader decide (voluptuous validity), 6) *be candid*, view subjectivity as a strength, rather than attempting detached objectivity, be forthright include some personal revelations (reflexive journal), 7) *seek feedback*, share developing manuscripts with knowledgeable readers as part of the analysis and writing phase (peer debriefing), 8) *try to achieve balance*, reread your transcripts and ensure that you have adequately presented a fair and balanced account of the setting and people involved (fairness), finally, 8) *write accurately*, ensure that the generalisations have real referents in what was seen or heard and that the conjecture is marked with appropriate tentativeness (descriptive validity; internal generalization).

Wolcott's (1994) eclectic list underscores an apparent shortcoming of the standard practice of dividing examinations of validity on the paradigm axis. If our goal is to continually strive for increasingly comprehensive and sophisticated notions of validity that most effectively take into account the triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis, then we should not be limiting ourselves; each conceptualisation, it would seem, has something to offer. To wit, perhaps validity techniques should be divided as they can be best applied at various research stages; for example, before beginning the project, during the collection of data and/or

interpretation, during the write-up, and following the write-up.

Discussion: A new eclectic/stage validity

As Lincoln (1995) explains "...[the] qualitative research community might well think about which criteria, at which stage, are the most useful and important, and to whom" (p. 286). It would appear that each conceptualisation of validity brings with it unique considerations for, and contributions to, enhancing our craft at various stages. As "truth is located within particular communities at particular times and used indexically to represent their condition" (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1032), validity is transformed into a function of user and purpose; certain issues, at certain times may emerge as dominant as others may fade to the background.

Conclusion

In the end we ought to strive to accurately reconstruct descriptions and interpretations that are supported by evidence, and to develop theories that both "fit" and "work". As qualitative researchers, we should generally be seeking to understand social phenomena, and to re-present it in as transparent and credible a fashion as possible, and to that extent each paradigmatic validity framing has something to offer; but ultimately,

> as finite beings, all we can do is construct social and educational worlds... constructed realities for which we are morally responsible.... there may be little more to say than this about judgment, criteria, and validity.... Our individual judgments inevitably must be moved into a public space where they are placed in concert with the judgments of others" (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 891).

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